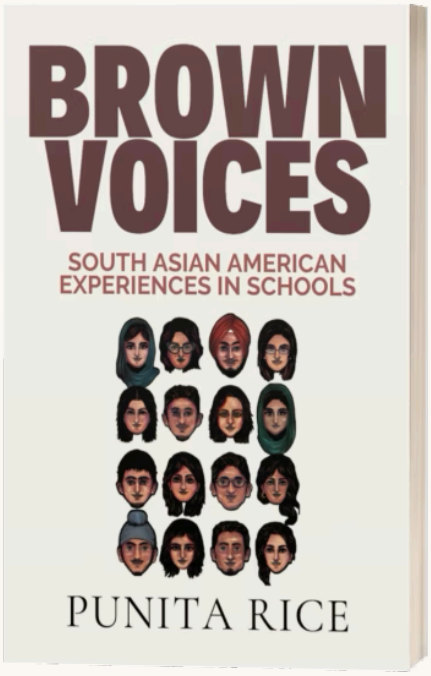
Brown Voices Reader's Guide

Discussion questions for book clubs, staff reading groups, families, and college courses



Dr. Punita Rice

For use with *Brown Voices: South Asian American Experiences in Schools* (Delville Press, 2026). Copyright © 2026 Punita Rice. You may print, copy, and share this guide freely. Please don't sell it.

How to use this guide

Brown Voices looks at what South Asian American students experience in U.S. schools, and what teachers, families, and institutions often miss because of assumptions tied to the model minority myth. It draws on my doctoral research at Johns Hopkins University: a survey of 85 South Asian American adults looking back on their K–12 years, in-depth interviews, and a small survey of teachers. It also includes conversations with South Asian American artists, creators, and therapists from the Brown Voices Project.

The research on one page 3

Reading schedules 4

Discussion questions by chapter 5

Discussion questions by theme 10

For families and parent groups 12

For college courses 13

The chapter questions follow the book in order, for groups reading it start to finish. The theme questions pull ideas from across the book, for a single meeting or for groups that haven't read the whole thing. Pick two or three questions per meeting rather than trying to cover them all.

A note before you start

South Asian American students are not one group. They have family roots in many countries, speak many languages, and practice many faiths or none. One of the clearest findings in this research is that students felt lumped together and assumed about. Try not to repeat that in your discussions. Talk about the people you know as individuals, and don't ask a South Asian student or colleague to speak for everyone.

The research on one page

This study asked 85 South Asian American adults to look back on their K–12 years. Across the three main areas of support (academic, executive functioning, and socioemotional), participants reported wanting substantially more help than they received.

77.6%
reported feeling teachers assumed they were smarter than students from other cultural or racial groups

68.2%
agreed that teachers assumed they needed less academic support than their peers from other cultural or racial groups

64.7%
agreed that teachers assumed they needed less help with time management and organization than their peers

72.9%
felt teachers did not understand them, their cultural identities, or their backgrounds

The model minority myth

The perception of Asians as the perfect minority: naturally intelligent, hardworking, self-disciplined, and emotionally mature, especially as compared with other minority groups. In reality, it is both inaccurate and harmful.

Teachers who believe it may assume students need less academic, executive functioning, and socioemotional support, which can be harmful for the students who seem furthest from the stereotype. For high achievers, it can magnify pressures they already face. 70.6% of participants said their teachers could have better supported their academic needs.

Being known

- 81.2% felt teachers knew little about them compared to students from other backgrounds
- 63.5% said teachers made assumptions about them based on their backgrounds
- 51.8% felt teachers grouped them with other Asian American subgroups

What teachers said

In a small preliminary survey of 15 teachers, about 47% felt culturally proficient related to South Asian American culture, about 27% reported lacking sufficient cultural proficiency, and about 27% were neutral. 87% believed they could benefit from learning more about South Asian American students. (A sample this small isn't generalizable.)

The supports students wanted

More individual help. More opportunities for review. Information broken into chunks. Check-ins on progress. Support developing organizational and time management skills. Help with writing. None of these are specialized supports; they are considered teaching best practices.

The full findings are in Chapters 3, 6, 9, and 10, and in Appendix G.

Reading schedules

Book club: four meetings

One part of the book per meeting. Use the chapter questions for that part and pick one theme set to close.

Meeting	Read	Discuss
1	Part One, *Brown Voices*: Chapters 1–2 (p. 3)	Chapter questions 1–2
2	Part Two, *The Classroom*: Chapters 3–6 (p. 29)	Chapter questions 3–6; theme 5
3	Part Three, *Model Minority*: Chapters 7–10 (p. 65)	Chapter questions 7–10; themes 1–4
4	Part Four, *What Now?*: Chapters 11–13 (p. 117)	Chapter questions 11–13

Staff reading group or PLC: six meetings

Shorter readings for groups that meet during the school day.

Meeting	Read	Focus
1	Chapters 1–2 (p. 3)	Who our South Asian American students are
2	Chapters 3–4 (p. 29)	Teachers, cultural proficiency, and overt racism
3	Chapters 5–6 (p. 44)	Microaggressions and disconnect
4	Chapters 7–8 (p. 65)	The model minority myth and the problem with it
5	Chapters 9–10 (p. 83)	Teachers, the myth, and students' support needs
6	Chapters 11–13 (p. 117)	What we will change

Page numbers are where each reading starts in the 2026 Delville Press edition.

Discussion questions by chapter

Part One: Brown Voices

1. Who Are Brown Kids?

1. The book opens with the author's own school years: she struggled, but teachers assumed she didn't need help, so she could "fly under the radar." Have you seen a student fly under the radar? What made it possible?
2. Ajay Nair says a single South Asian American identity "creates a homogeneity, a false unity." The chapter names differences of country, language, religion, generation, class, caste, and colorism. Which of these differences are present among the South Asian Americans you know?
3. The chapter imagines a teacher who is confused when a student confides a family problem, because South Asian Americans "were supposed to be more private." Where is the line between useful cultural knowledge and applying the general to the specific?
4. The book uses two kinds of voices: research participants with changed names, and Brown Voices Project interviewees using their real names. What does each kind of voice add?

---

2. Between Two Worlds

1. Seema found her best friends at mandir; Sujata Day went to Hindu camp, learned Bharatanatyam, and spoke Bengali at home; Saloni Nahar's family gathered with Desi families from nearby suburbs. The chapter describes this kind of connection as protective. Where do young people you know find that kind of community?
2. Heems once said he lived "two lives, an Indian one and an American one." Years later, he describes that question as a first stepping stone he has moved past. How might an adult support a young person who is still in the middle of it?
3. The chapter lists ways students may hide outward signs of being Desi: leaving family items out of show and tell, skipping Culture Night, never mentioning family foods or places of worship. What might a teacher misread in a student who is doing this?
4. In *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), the Supreme Court ruled that Thind, a Sikh Indian man, could not become a citizen because he was not White as "the common man" understood the word. How does the chapter connect that ruling to the question "where are you really from?" today?
5. Some students feel culturally adrift, without a close tie to their family's culture or to their classmates. How would you recognize that in a student, and what might help?

Part Two: The Classroom

3. Teachers

1. 94.1% of participants had earned, or were earning, a college degree. The chapter gives three reasons that "just fine" is not enough anyway. Which one is most convincing to you?
2. The chapter says its claims aren't accusations: teachers do want to do right by their students, but wanting to and being equipped to are not the same thing. Where do you feel equipped, and where don't you?
3. Teachers in the small survey reported feeling confident supporting South Asian American students while also admitting gaps in their knowledge. Why might confidence and gaps exist side by side?
4. The author argues that teachers must be held to a higher standard of cultural proficiency than the general public, and admits that the higher standard is frustrating. Do you agree? What would make it realistic?

---

4. Overt Racism

1. Pooja's classmates mocked her for being Indian and Hindu, and her teachers did very little to step in. The chapter says that silence was not neutral. What does a teacher who stays quiet communicate to the student being targeted, and to the students doing it?
2. Neha, Neil, and Rohan describe racism from teachers themselves. Rohan says a teacher's casual comments left him "embarrassed of my cultural identity." How would a school find out this is happening?
3. After September 11, 2001, Sikh students who wear turbans were among those targeted most. When the news turns against a community, which students in your school might be targeted, whether or not they belong to it?
4. Karan, in Chapter 6, says no one at school talked to him about 9/11 and how it affected him. When a major event touches a student's community, whose job is it to check in?

---

5. Microaggressions

1. The chapter says that whether an interaction is experienced as racism depends on how the person receiving it experiences it, not on intent. Why can that be hard for adults to accept?
2. Eleven participants described being made spokespersons for their culture. Jaya had to talk about Diwali though her family doesn't celebrate it; Aman was asked at ten to check whether a class text about India was accurate. How can a teacher invite students to share without assigning it to them?
3. Neha was always put in "the India group," asked to bring items from home, and told to tutor classmates instead of being challenged herself. How many separate harms can you name in that one account?
4. Jayashree remembers "the distance and awkwardness of not having a Western name that teachers pronounced easily." What do you do to learn names correctly? (Chapter 11 has practical ideas.)

6. Disconnect

1. 58.8% of participants felt peers from other cultural groups were more connected to school than they were, and 47.1% felt their teachers did not understand them as people. Who in your school might feel this way?
2. Harpreet's teachers "seemed to assume we were all the same." A history teacher's college recommendation called another participant's Hindu temple a mosque. What does this kind of mistake tell a student?
3. Bobby's advice to teachers: acknowledge a student's cultural background, "but don't make it a focus unless [the] student desires to do so." Parth says his culture "didn't come up, even when it should have." How do you tell the difference?
4. One participant wrote, "Teachers assumed I was fine when I wasn't, based solely on my heritage." Laila had no outlet at school for serious mental health struggles. What signs of distress might a student who is doing well on paper show?

Part Three: Model Minority

7. The Model Minority Myth

1. The chapter uses Raj on *The Big Bang Theory* and Apu on *The Simpsons* as examples of the myth on television. What images of South Asian Americans do the young people you know see in media?
2. The chapter connects the myth in part to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which favored highly educated, skilled immigrants. Why does that history matter when we look at achievement data?
3. The book offers counter-evidence: working-class South Asian immigrants in the early 1900s, and a wide range of incomes and education among South Asian Americans today. Which of this surprised you?
4. Ms. Morrison says students in her school throw around "racist Asian stereotypes," and staff tend to "laugh it off." Does that happen where you work or study?

---

8. The Problem with the Myth

1. "The model minority myth is not a compliment. It's a support gap." The chapter also cites research showing that believing positive stereotypes can increase belief in negative ones. What do you make of that?
2. Therapist Zohra Lasi says a high-performing child "might be going through a lot of internal battles that we don't see because it's masked by their success." Pooja says her exacting model of learning "backfired in college." How would an adult notice what's behind the success?
3. Seema, who struggled to focus, says she "really felt ashamed of not performing well." How does the myth work like a fixed mindset, and what does it do to a student's willingness to ask for help?
4. *Log kya kahenge*: what will people say? How might that fear show up in a classroom?
5. The chapter describes the myth being used as a wedge between Asian Americans and other communities of color. How might the same comparisons show up in a school?

9. Teachers and the Myth

1. A former colleague of the author, a committed equity advocate, kept forgetting to check on an Indian student in her inclusion math class until she realized how far behind he was. The book calls her catching herself self-reflection, not failure. Have you caught yourself in a similar assumption?
2. In the teacher survey, 60% said South Asian American students did not need a great deal of support compared with other groups. 80% said Black or African American students did. What do these numbers suggest about how support gets handed out?
3. Ms. Jackson, Ms. Vause, Ms. Tarley, and Ms. Morrison were interviewed together. Whose words sound most like your school? Ms. Tarley warns: “A kid who needs support, you won’t notice until he’s really struggling.”
4. Ms. Vause admits her surprise at finding a South Asian American student in her special education reading class, and says she would benefit from professional development. What makes that kind of honesty possible among colleagues?

---

10. The Myth and Support Needs

1. 82.4% of participants wanted more opportunities for review, and 80% wanted help developing time management skills, which 60% did not receive. Which gap would be easiest to close in a classroom you know?
2. Amrita was in honors classes but never recommended for AP, and as a first-generation college student she needed help applying to college. Teachers “assume that I am fine doing that all on my own because I was a good student.” Who else might be assumed to have that help at home?
3. Sabeen Marghoob, a high achiever, wishes teachers had known that Brown kids were struggling too, and needed “just someone telling them they believe in them.” Who gets encouragement in your classroom, and who is assumed not to need it?
4. Pooja says, “I wouldn’t have gone into college as a premed if I had been given the space to do otherwise.” How do schools support students whose interests lie outside STEM?
5. Only 3 of the 85 participants said their teachers supported them adequately, and all three described themselves as self-sufficient or proactive. What does that suggest about students who aren’t?

Part Four: What Now?

11. Implications for Teachers and Other Educators

1. The chapter names four classroom conditions: strong student–teacher relationships, no tolerance for bias or "jokes" rooted in race or religion, ongoing growth in cultural proficiency, and curriculum that expands whose stories count. Which is strongest where you teach or learn? Which is weakest?
2. Try the chapter's exercise: imagine how your students see you, not how you intend to come across. What did you notice?
3. Julie Thomas Achettu has the whole class interview a relative and look for themes they share, so no one student has to represent a culture. How could you adapt that idea?
4. "The message students should receive is not 'my teacher is perfect' but 'my teacher thinks I'm worth the effort.'" Where else, besides names, does that idea apply?

---

12. Implications for Teacher Training Design

1. The chapter recommends training with two parts: general cultural proficiency and knowledge specific to the students a school serves. Does the training you've had include both?
2. Two teachers interviewed for the book preferred online modules because they felt more "manageable," but one admitted online training is "harder to take seriously." What has worked for you?
3. What ground rules would let teachers ask honest questions in a training session without anyone feeling attacked?
4. Ms. Ortiz, a school administrator, says her last school "wasn't ready" to have the race talk. Is your school ready? How would you know?

---

13. Beyond the Classroom: Schools, Families, and Policy

1. Asian American teachers are often left out of recruitment efforts, and some families see teaching as low on the career ladder. What would encourage more South Asian American students to consider teaching?
2. The chapter's advice for families includes connecting to both American and South Asian culture, replacing judgment with curiosity, taking off the pressure, teaching growth mindset and self-advocacy, and reaching out to teachers early. Which would be hardest for families you know?
3. The chapter quotes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on the single story, which "creates stereotypes." What stories about South Asian Americans do the books, shows, and curriculum around you offer?
4. Many school systems report all Asian American students as one group. What might that single number hide, and who could push for separating it?

Discussion questions by theme

Each set opens with the finding it builds on and the chapters to read with it.

1. The model minority myth

77.6% of participants felt their teachers believed the myth. Read Chapters 7–8.

1. Before reading, how would you have described the model minority myth? What did the book add to or change about that description?
2. Why might a stereotype that sounds like a compliment still do harm?
3. Which voices or stories in these chapters stayed with you most? Why those?

---

2. Who gets help

68.2% agreed that teachers assumed they needed less academic support than their peers. Read Chapter 8 (The Non-Model Students) and Chapter 10.

1. Think of a student who was quietly struggling and didn't ask for help. How did you find out? What would have helped you find out sooner?
2. The research says lower-achieving students may become or feel invisible. What would make that kind of invisibility visible to you?
3. What does your school do when a student's grades don't match adults' expectations of them?

---

3. High achievers and pressure

70.6% said their teachers could have better supported their academic needs. Read Chapter 8 ("Model" Students) and Chapter 10 (Socioemotional Support).

1. What does it look like when a student is succeeding on paper but not doing well?
2. Where does pressure on high-achieving students come from: school, family, peers, the students themselves? Which of those can a teacher actually influence?
3. What is the difference between high expectations and an assumption? How would a student feel the difference?

4. The basics of good teaching

64.7% agreed that teachers assumed they needed less help with time management and organization than their peers. Read Chapter 10 (Executive Functioning Support).

1. Look at the supports participants said they wanted (page 3). Which do you already give to every student? Which do you give only to some, and how do you choose?
2. Why might adults assume a student doesn't need help with organization or writing?

---

5. Being known

81.2% felt teachers knew little about them compared to students from other backgrounds, and 51.8% felt teachers grouped them with other Asian American subgroups. Read Chapters 1, 5, and 6.

1. What do you know about the family backgrounds, languages, and faith traditions of the South Asian American students you teach? Where did that knowledge come from?
2. "Asian American" covers many communities. When does a broad label help, and when does it get in the way of seeing a student?
3. What is one way you could learn more about your students without putting any one of them on the spot?

---

6. Our own readiness

In the small teacher survey, fewer than half of teachers said they felt culturally competent with South Asian American students, and 87% said they'd benefit from learning more. Read Chapters 9 and 12.

1. How confident do you feel supporting South Asian American students? What would raise that confidence?
2. Where could your school build this learning into time you already have?

---

7. School and home

The book is written for families as well as teachers. Read Chapter 2 and Chapter 13 (How Families can Support Brown Kids).

1. How do families in your school learn what their children experience during the day? What gets lost?
2. What might a South Asian American parent want their child's teacher to know? How could you make it easier for them to tell you?
3. If you are a parent, or once were a South Asian American student yourself, which parts of the book felt most familiar?

For families and parent groups

For PTA meetings, parent book clubs, and community or faith groups. Read Chapter 2 and the section of Chapter 13 on how families can support Brown kids. Chapter 8 helps too, for parents who want to understand the pressure the model minority myth puts on children.

Questions to talk through

1. What do you remember about your own school years? Which parts of the book felt familiar, and which felt different from your child's school now?
2. Zohra Lasi suggests replacing concern and judgment with curiosity: "Go to your child and be curious about what this pressure is." What would that conversation sound like in your home?
3. Pinkal Panchal says, "Don't make home another source" of pressure. Where does pressure on your child come from? Which of it comes from home?
4. When your child struggles, do they hear it as part of learning, or as proof they aren't smart? How do you talk about effort and mistakes?
5. How does your family help your child connect with your culture, and with American culture? What do you hope your child keeps, and what do you hope they feel free to choose?
6. The book suggests introducing yourself to teachers early in the year, before there's a problem. What gets in the way of that for you?

Questions a parent could ask a teacher

These come from the supports participants in the research said they wanted. Bring two or three to a conference.

- [ ] How do you check on my child's progress during classwork?
- [ ] When my child is stuck, what does help look like in your class?
- [ ] Does my child get support with writing assignments and with managing time on long assignments?
- [ ] How is my child doing with organization? What could we work on at home?
- [ ] Who at school does my child go to when something is wrong?
- [ ] Is there anything you've noticed about how my child is doing, apart from grades?

For college courses

Brown Voices began as a doctoral dissertation, and the appendices show how the study was built. That makes it useful in teacher preparation, education research methods, and Asian American studies courses.

Course	Read
Teacher preparation	Parts Two and Three (Chapters 3–10), then Chapters 11–12. Use the theme questions as a field-placement reflection.
Research methods	Chapters 9–10 with Appendices A–G: the research framework, pre-study, instrumentation, sample, constructed response coding, survey instrument, and selected findings.
Asian American studies	Parts One and Three (Chapters 1–2 and 7–10), with Chapter 13.

Questions on the research

1. Appendix A describes the lenses used to interpret the findings: multicultural education, critical race theory, and pragmatism. What does each one let the researcher see?
2. Participants were adults looking back on their K–12 years, and the survey prompted them to reflect on those years before answering. What are the strengths and limits of retrospective data?
3. Appendix D reports that 88.2% of participants identified as Indian American, and that the sample was highly educated. How might that shape the findings? What would a more varied sample add?
4. Participants were recruited largely through college and community South Asian organizations and social media. Who might that approach reach, and who might it miss?
5. The teacher pre-study (Appendix B) recruited 100 teachers; 29 finished the survey, and 15 were eligible. What can and can't a sample that size tell us?
6. Appendix E explains how three open-ended responses were coded on a 0–2 scale. What is gained and lost when written answers become numbers?
7. Appendix H suggests future research on specific subgroups, colorism, socioeconomic status, school demographics, and immigration, and notes that this sample grew up after September 11, 2001. Design a follow-up study. Whom would you ask, and what?

The glossary (p. 165) defines the book's key terms, including cultural proficiency, the model minority myth, and support.

More from Brown Voices

Schools can order ten paperbacks at a time, and the *Brown Voices* PD Toolkit has ready-to-run professional development sessions, handouts, and two high school lessons. To invite Dr. Punita Rice to speak to your school, book club, or event, visit brownvoicesproject.com.